

## *Chapter Five*

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# *When conflict persists*

*I*f conflict occurs as frequently as I am suggesting, but only some conflict becomes chronic, then we must already have a way of resolving it. Since conflict occurs in the head of an individual, the resolution must also occur in the head of the individual. The problem can't be taken out and tinkered with and then put back in a restored condition. When psychotherapy is successful, in whatever form it has been delivered, it is because this internal elimination of the conflict has somehow been facilitated. When psychotherapy of any variety fails it's because this internal process has been impeded. Understanding what happens will help you to maximize the times you support the process as a psychotherapist and minimize the times you get in the way.

### **REORGANIZATION**

In PCT, Powers proposes that there is a reorganizing system which is responsible for the construction and maintenance of the hierarchy of control systems. Basically the reorganizing system's job is to create new connections, alter existing connections, or otherwise fuss with the parameters of the control systems. It is the work of the reorganizing system that allows us to learn so that we come to experience perceptual activity that we might not have known before.

A system that alters the connections between control systems is precisely the system that we need in order to resolve conflict. For as long as two incompatible references are being specified simultaneously, conflict will be experienced. Conflict will be eliminated when the configuration or the parameters (or both) of the appropriate control systems are altered.

The reorganizing system can be thought of as a control system just like the individual loops in the perceptual hierarchy, but this is a metaphor. As Powers has explained

It's as if there is a separate set of control systems concerned with maintaining intrinsic variables at inherited reference levels. We don't know if there is actually such a system, or if the proposed effects are caused by properties distributed over the whole brain and body.

Metaphorically then, the reorganizing system perceives, compares, and acts. The system perceives various fundamental, physiological states of our bodies that are necessary for our survival. These fundamental variables such as body temperature and biochemical concentrations are called intrinsic variables in PCT. It is the perceived

states of these variables that are controlled by the reorganizing system. When there is error associated with the control of an intrinsic variable, the reorganizing system acts to reduce the error by making the perceived state match the desired state. It does so by making random changes at particular places in the perceptual hierarchy until error decreases. It is possible that some of these intrinsic control systems are at the highest level of the perceptual hierarchy, with the reorganizing system modifying the hierarchy until that these high level control systems can make their perceptions of intrinsic variables match reference values.

It seems in fact that the perceptual hierarchy is created as a by-product of these intrinsic control systems controlling their intrinsic variables. Bourbon says it this way:

The perceptual hierarchy exists for one purpose—that it serves as a means by which intrinsic physiological reference conditions can be created and maintained. That is what comes first, and last, and all the time in between. We think that the self-replicating molecules, like those in DNA, are control systems, complete with their equivalents of reference signals that specify which ‘perceptions’ of molecular shape, or of chemical states, they will ‘sense.’ On this construal, genes are not ‘commands’ for what we will become, but they are control systems that control for certain molecular states; all of the rest that happens is in a way one big side-effect of control at the biochemical level. If that is so, then it must be the case that, more often than not, creatures like us, with perceptual hierarchies like ours, end up being good environments for DNA to achieve its own control.

Although writing in a different context, John Gribbin appeared to express the same idea when he said “Biologists have an aphorism that ‘a hen is the egg’s way of making more eggs.’ In the same way, a human being is simply the genes’ way of making more copies of themselves.” (1998, p. 116).

When intrinsic error is present, reorganization continues randomly jiggling the hierarchy at different places until the intrinsic variables are once again in their reference states. It should be pointed out that while reorganization is occurring, an individual can actually experience a *loss* of control abilities for a period of time as control systems are adjusted (if you’ve ever learnt to use chopsticks, or changed the grip on your forehand volley, or driven a car where the indicator lever and windscreen wiper lever are swapped around, or rearranged your furniture but then continued to go to the place where your favorite chair used to be, you’ll know the kind of experience I mean). Although this may be of concern while it is occurring, as reorganization continues, a solution ultimately arrives.

The reorganizing system has no concept of good or bad, moral or immoral, naughty or nice. The only business of the reorganizing system is error reduction. When error is reduced and the sensed conditions of the intrinsic variables are at their desired levels, the reorganizing system ceases acting on the perceptual hierarchy. The hierarchy then is maintained in whatever arrangement it was in when intrinsic error was sufficiently reduced.

## *What's been said*

Reorganization is a random process that alters existing control systems so that intrinsic error is reduced.

Reorganization seems to be linked with awareness.

For problems to be resolved, reorganization must occur at the appropriate place in the hierarchy.

Conflicts endure when reorganization does not occur at the level that is creating the conflict.

## *The big deal*

The only thing that matters in psychotherapy is helping people become aware of the level that is setting the incompatible goals so that reorganization can make whatever adjustments are necessary.

## *Coming up*

How to help people shift their awareness to higher perceptual levels.